

Is 'sex' as socially constructed as 'gender'?

"Gender" is generally believed to be a socially produced cultural component pertaining to lifestyle, behavior, state of mind, desire, etc. whereas "sex" is generally considered a biologically determined fact of the body. One of the most obvious problems with this hypothesis becomes clear when we are confronted with another common fragment of discourse regarding sex and gender: that "gender" is a cultural component that follows the biologically determined, invariable state-of-being called "sex." In other words, that gender is determined by sex. A cultural construction determined by a biological fact.

If gender is a culture which can be applied to distinctly "gendered" social norms, then it would seem that gender would have relative self-determination, independent of so-called "biological" conditions. However, according to the popular assumption of gender determined by sex, gender is an assemblage of social norms, mentalities, desires (in the context of heteronormativity) and lifestyle characteristics that is not free to determine, compose, produce or reinvent itself. The implicit assumption is that culture, social norms, modes of expression, desires, etc. (components of "gender") are determined by and dependent on the totalitarian fact of biology.

In other words, sex and gender as the same thing residing in two different regions (this implies that sex is socially constructed alongside gender). These two different regions parallel the Cartesian dichotomy of "body" and "mind" or "spiritual" and "material." Sex as the material version of gender residing in the body and gender as the spiritual version of sex residing in the mind.

When these two A/B categories contradict each other or fail to match up with expected social norms, the contradiction often seems to be either overlooked or penalized through cultural regulation, alienation, etc. The "male" who fulfills social expectations of "appearing male" while behaving, moving, thinking or expressing "himself" in a manner that contradicts "his male appearance" relating to anatomy might face social alienation and/or demands that "he" conform to predetermined "male" social norms. Such nonconformity may be overlooked by retreating to the female/male dichotomy, resorting to the "feminine male" reference: if something is not female, then it's considered male and vice versa. The standards regulating what is considered to be a sexed appearance or gendered behavior are not universal, but are socio-historical constructions just like the related Cartesian dichotomies of body and mind.

What makes these assumptions regarding sex/gender even more problematic is that the biological fact of sex is restricted between the biological fact of A or the biological fact of B, female or male. Therefore, gendered social norms can only fall between two categories which inevitably makes social regulation, demands for conformity, cultural penalization, etc. necessary to sustain these two categories. My assumption here is that gender/sex can't realistically conform to only two categories such as female and male. I'm assuming with no other evidence aside from my personal observations and life experiences (hardly scientific), that gender/sex can form multiple varieties within one person and that these various sex/genders can be abandoned and new gender/saxes can be freshly created in complete spontaneity, from moment to moment. This assumption is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of gender/sex as "free multiplicities" synthesized from "local and nonspecific connections," with people becoming "not one or even two sexes, but n sexes." (Deleuze, G. Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus*. University of Minnesota, p 295-96).

Schools of science such as "biology" or "anatomy" providing "evidence" (as recognized within the ideology of science) for binary sexed bodies is something that should be viewed with skepticism. Science functions quite similar to church hierarchies, providing the unquestionable "truths" to unanswerable questions, legitimizing the status quo (Bey, H. "The Information War," *Hakim Bey and*

Ontological Anarchy, www.hermetic.com/bey/, retrieved Apr 24, 2009). With the function of providing ahistorical, universalized definitions of the sexed body, science plays a factor in legitimizing oppressive gender roles since gender is commonly perceived to be determined by the biologically defined sex of the body. Groups and individuals that are socially victimized and dominated are socialized into adopting cognitive frameworks of perception that lead people to suppressing themselves and conforming to established categories of what is recognized as normal and acceptable (Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Masculine Domination*, Stanford University Press, p 11-14).

In this context, exercising gender/sex autonomy, in Guattari/Deleuze terms, “becoming” our own sex/genders can be very difficult since our autonomy is restricted by what is socially recognized. Apply for a passport and check “M” or “F” on the sex section of the application. What is socially recognized is confined to what conforms to social norms, or “normalized” by the preexisting definitions gender/sex. Social norms making social recognition a possibility. In that sense, exercising individual sex/gender autonomy needs to coincide with widespread changes in an entire society (Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, p 7).

How does the male/female binary relate to the heterosexual/homosexual binary?

“Hetero” refers to the “other” whereas “homo” refers to the “same.” If we were allowed to freely interpret and recreate our own definition of hetero/homosexuality, we wouldn’t necessarily need to confine these sexualities to a gender/sex binary or accept these two sexualities as the only sexualities that exist. If there is an extensive variety of sex/genders, then there would also be an extensive variety or a multiplicity of sexualities that could refer to each and every sexual relationship between these numerous gender/sexes if cognitively or linguistically possible, or necessary. Within such a context, “heterosexuality” or “homosexuality” would comprise general, somewhat vague and nonspecific references.

However, if we must restrain our creativity, our dreamy idealism of the “what might be possible,” then we must consider heterosexuality as the sexuality which confines sexual relations between the “female” and the “male,” and homosexuality as the sexuality which confines sexual relations between the “female” and “female” or “male” and “male,” as defined within the restrictive gender/sex binary. Even within contemporary restrictive codes and sexuality references relating to the female/male binary, if we consider the inclusion of bisexuality, then we have a hetero/homo/bi-sexual ternary. “Bi,” signifying “two” or “both,” includes every sex/gender comprising the gender/sex bi-nary when attached to the “sexuality” term.

If all of the sexualities included within the homo/hetero/bisexuality ternary are considered in terms of their codified relation with the male/female binary, “bisexuality” seems like the only sexuality within the ternary that would become linguistically insignificant if our concepts of sex/gender transcend the female/male binary. That is, if “free multiplicities” of gender/sexes become socially recognized, then references to a “bi”sexuality would become incomprehensible because there would no longer be a sex/gender “bi”nary (Deleuze, G. Guattari, F. (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota, p 275-6).

The connotative meanings of terms constantly change and terms are always free to appropriate and recreate. “Homosexuality” can refer to sexual relationships and sexual preferences between people of the same sex/gender(s) within a vast multitude of various gender/sexes, and “heterosexuality” can refer to sexual relationships and preferences between people of different sex/gender(s) within a wide variety of gender/sexes, unless the connotative meaning of both “homo” and “hetero” are recreated anew. Unless the definition of “bi” is appropriated and/or historically changes, it refers to “two” or “both” which restricts sex/gender as well as sexuality within a bi/ternary system.

Current efforts to free up sexuality which can amount to simply recognizing and giving a straightforward reference to one’s own sexuality(s) are undermined by the gender/sex binary.

“Polysexuality” refers to sexual relationships and sexual preferences with various sex/genders outside of the sex/gender binary. “Pansexuality” refers to sexual relationships and sexual preferences with the totality of all possible gender/sexes. The question of which sex/gender(s) is the codified boundary which restricts sexual possibilities within the binary or otherwise signifies the vague and abstract, perhaps “hypothetical” gender/sexes.

Polysexuality can face complications if someone is determined to or feels compelled to signify which specific sex/genders with whom we prefer to engage in sexual relationships. Other than “trans,” which seems to refer to any of the “other” gender/sexes outside of the binary (although “trans” has become a completely new sex/gender which can be diverse), which specific gender/sexes (outside of the binary) can a polysexual person make reference to? What is the function of referring to that which hasn’t received social recognition? Can references to the socially unrecognized widen the boundaries of what is socially recognized or maybe even socially recognizable? Would this action function as a “forcing to recognize” mechanism? Has it, historically? Or would it function as the production of misunderstanding when new concepts migrate into the mainstream, into the realms of the widely recognized?

There certainly isn’t a totalitarian framework within which references to the contemporary socially unrecognized can be determined to have a homogeneous outcome that’s independent of socio-historical context and/or spontaneity alike. “My sex is not ‘female’ or ‘male,’ but ‘human,’ as long as ‘human’ is the animal species that I belong to, among a wide variety of species on this planet, including seaweed which is delicious to eat sometimes.” Perhaps one can undermine the gender/sex binary by making references to the socially recognized, although such references may be disregarded as “humorous” due to not referring to what is codified as sex/gender. A: “Where are you from?” B: “I’m from earth, like you, right?” (no reference to a nation-state). A: “Do you have a girlfriend?” B: “I don’t want a boyfriend or girlfriend, just regular intimate and sexual relationships.” (evading heteronormativity without making references to codified “other” sexualities, but perhaps generating more questions through unclear and general references).

Given the socially recognizable norms and codes through which we are able to exercise our creativities, our capacity for autonomy may seem confined and restricted within the boundaries of the socially acceptable. However, history shows that social norms, codes and what is considered “acceptable” are not static or stable. Freedoms are confined within socio-historical contexts, but at the same time, freedoms have the capacity to play a role in creating socio-historical contexts when exercised with vigor, spontaneity and enthusiasm (and...and...).

References

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